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Adrienne Rich:"Re-membering" Women's History and Language

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ADRIENNE RICH: "RE-MEMBERING" WOMEN'S HISTORY AND LANGUAGE

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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"Feminism begins but cannot end with the discovery by an individual of her self-consciousness as a woman." (Rich Conditions 207)

"Neither literature nor history nor biography offers, with any substance or until our time, a record that includes a woman in a house on a cloudy day talking with her friend or a meeting between two major women writers." (Bernikow 5)

"Insofar as a woman poet accepts without question the language she is given, she is also accepting a set of patriarchal, capitalist, racist, heterosexist assumptions which are built into the language and which, at the least, deny her an identity of her own." (Annas 10)

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich is a woman and a poet. Her striving to define and to integrate these two aspects of her life have caused her poetry to undergo a profound metamorphosis during the more than 30 years that she has been writing, producing changes in both the style and content of her work. In style, Rich progresses from a traditional metered rhyme scheme through a series of experimental forms that reflect her changing perception of self and society. She finally arrives at a fluid free verse that mirrors her acceptance of her own power as woman and poet. In content, Rich's poems change even more radically. Her poetic concerns echo her personal growth and the development of her awareness as a woman in a male-controlled society. Albert and Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi simplify this arduous evolution when they state that,

> from the beginning Rich's theme, personal and collective, has been woman in the patriarchy: her own identity, the identity of woman on man's established terms; and, more and more urgently, the possibility of identity on her own, on woman's terms (Introduction xi).

Actually, Adrienne Rich's work advances through three distinct phases, and it is not until the second phase, early in the 1960's, that "woman in the patriarchy" emerges as the controlling focus of Rich's work. This new focus marks her divergence from the mainstream of accepted women poets of that time and initiates her significant influence on the changing themes in women's writing.

The topics and themes of Adrienne Rich's early books of poetry do not differ significantly from that of other noted women poets of the 1950's. A Change of World, published in 1951, and The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems, published in 1955, exhibit the same sense of impersonal observation as the poems of Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop. Rich, like Moore and Bishop, concentrates on surface descriptions of people, objects, and events. The overwhelming reality of being a woman relating and interpreting these subjects is not allowed to overtly influence any of their perceptions. In these first two books, however, Rich does hint at an underlying uneasiness with her inhibited expression that even the precise formulation of the poems cannot completely mask.

Adrienne Rich's second phase of writing extends from 1955 through 1975 and includes the books Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963), Necessities of Life (1966), Leaflets (1969), The Will to Change (1971), Diving into the Wreck (1973), and Poems: Selected and New (1975). During

the interim period between Rich's second and third books, her responsibilities as a wife and mother severely curtailed her opportunities to write. She began to question the system that demanded a different sociological and cultural conditioning for each separate gender. Rich looked at what it meant to be a woman in this society. These six books delineate the struggle of knowing, naming, and examining the problem of the patriarchal system that Rich discovers to be influencing her life and work.

Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, two poets that Rich is most often associated with in anthologies of literature, also wrote at this time about the restrictions of being women. Unlike Rich, however, they never progressed beyond the personal, "confessional" mode to see their problem as crucial to all women. They could not break out of the restraints of the patriarchy until they knew what was binding them--and so the restraints overwhelmed them. Their poems remain as images of women caught in the web of male dominance struggling to free themselves to discover their own power.

Adrienne Rich not only freed herself during this period, but also began to use the power of her poetry to emancipate all women. She worked, as she said, "to define a female consciousness which is political, aesthetic, and erotic, and which refuses to be included or contained in the culture of passivity" (Foreword 18). Rich did this by

discovering, "re-viewing," and "re-membering" for women, two major facets of patriarchal structure that unconsciously influence women's perceptions of themselves from the moment of birth; history and language.

Many of Rich's poems during this second phase introduce women to their own historical role models. The history that women learn in schools has been structured by and for men to reinforce their own value system. Dale Spender reinforces Rich's poems from this time when she states that,

> in a male-dominated society the interests of men are not always and perhaps not often compatible with those of women, but while men control information with an eye to their own interest, the knowledge that they produce about women is all that is publicly available, and we are forced to draw upon it to make sense of the world, even though it may do little or nothing to reflect or enhance our lives. (Feminist Theorists 369)

The language that women speak has been shaped in the same manner. Rich believes that these two points are inextricably linked together, for history dictates what language relates. If women's history is not considered important enough to retain and relate, then the language that women have created in order to recount their experiences is lost. Women are left with a language that

reflects a male perception of life. Women cannot regain control of their own lives until they have the knowledge and control of these two aspects of their culture. These two themes assume more and more prominence in Adrienne Rich's poetry as she labors to rename herself and all women.

The third phase of Rich's writing goes beyond just noting women's losses to restoring their history and language. This is the resolution of the intense study of the patriarchy and its ramifications that Rich conducts in her six previous books. In The Dream of a Common Language (1978) and A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (1981) she gives women access to their own lives. She demands they define themselves rather than allowing society to do it for them.

Most recent critical evaluations of Adrienne Rich's work emphasize the progression in her philosophy and her poetry from an acceptance of the patriarchal standards to an embracing of feminist principles. Carol Christ, Wendy Martin, Judith McDaniel and Albert Gelpi all trace this major change in Rich's work. Other critics, Suzanne Juhasz and Erica Jong for example, simply explicate the feminist precepts in Rich's poems. A rising area of criticism centers around Adrienne Rich's discussion of the loss of language and a few critics even note her work on the history of women. All of these themes are vitally important to the understanding of Rich and her writing. However, critics, to

this point, have largely ignored the intricate link between history and language that Rich discovered. The loss of one dictates the loss of the other. Consequently, the recovery of one cannot be accomplished without the recovery of the other. And, though critics rarely remark on it, the recovery of language and history is what concerns Rich now.

This paper details the evolution of Adrienne Rich's poetry through the three stages of her creative maturation. It examines those personal and societal influences that have caused her to make major changes in the form and content of her work. The development of her major themes of women, history, and language are closely documented since her unique place in literature stems from her expansion of these topics. This thesis points out the connections between these themes and emphasizes the method of restoration that Rich has refined.

Adrienne Rich is a significant poet, not in spite of being a woman, but because she is a woman. She is one of the first poets to explore what being a woman means in terms of creativity and social acceptance. She frees women to search out and name themselves and gives them her own journey as a guide. She is giving women back control of their own lives by giving them back their history and language. Finally, Adrienne Rich legitimizes woman as the source and subject of poetry.

> for about 20 years I wrote for a particular man, who criticized and praised me and made me feel I was indeed "special." The obverse side of this, of course, was that I tried for a long time to please him, or rather, not to displease him. (38-39)

When her formal schooling began, there were others who reiterated the same social and literary conventions that Rich had learned from her father. In retrospect Rich sees them as "other men--writers, teachers--the Man, who was not a terror or a dream but a literary master and a master in other ways less easy to acknowledge" ("When We Dead" 39). These influences were strong and since she was being lauded for the poems she produced there was no reason yet to challenge them.

In the poems in these first two books she is not consciously questioning any of society's dictates. Still, there is a certain uneasiness about many of her pieces, as if she is noting the unseen ties that bind her, but unsure about how they truly affect her. This vague malaise is most often subsumed by the rigid control she exerts over form and topic.

In the 1950's Rich is an "exceptional" woman trying to be accepted in an art that defines <u>poet</u> as <u>male</u>. In order to do this, she adheres to the standards of excellence that she learned at her father's knee and had reinforced

during her schooling. The standards at this time demanded traditional forms--"objectivity," "universality." This meant, for Rich, that most of her poems were generalized in topic and in subject. Rarely is the specific I in evidence, and, if it is, it is still an I that somehow is not Rich. There is always a certain distance involved. Emotions are muted or stifled entirely and detachment is the rule.

Adrienne Rich's first book, A Change of World, written in 1951, is a melange of forms and influences. The influences were the dominant male poets of the era. As Rich stated in, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,"

> I know my style was formed first by male poets: by men I was reading as an undergraduate--Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, MacNiece, Stevens, Yeats. What I chiefly learned from them was craft. (39-40)

Through the study of the works of these men, Rich apparently mastered the "craft" of poetry, for in his introduction to her first book, W. H. Auden praises her for this very quality. He does note the debt that she owes the various male poets whose influence can be seen. Finally, he states that,

> the poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs: that for a first volume is a great deal. (2)

Auden comes close to describing the "perfect" woman poet of the 50's as well as the poems of Rich, the women poets, as Rich remarks, "like Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop," who "kept sexuality at a measured and chiseled distance" ("When We Dead" 36).

In this first volume Adrienne Rich has not yet found her own voice. The themes of women, history, and language are only previewed. "Storm Warnings," the first poem in the book, gives a forewarning of Rich's reaction when "weather abroad / And weather in the heart alike come on / Regardless of prediction." Change is something to be averted and "we can only close the shutters" against it when it cannot be stopped. "This is our sole defense against the season; / These are the things we have learned to do / Who live in troubled regions." Upheavals in life, conflict are to be shuttered against and evaded. The form of the poem does this very effectively by restraining the occasional anapest in a strict iambic rhythm.

This strict control of form extends to Adrienne Rich's first poem in this volume about the relationship between the sexes, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers:"

> Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
> Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
> They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
> They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

The crafting of this poem is made even tighter by the use of rhyme. There is a need for this restraint for Rich is handling a topic, marriage, that is not often questioned at this time. Aunt Jennifer's will and spirit inhabit the needlework tigers that she has painstakingly created. They are stronger than the men that occupy the same world that they do. The tigers become Aunt Jennifer's alter-ego, the part of her that cannot exist under "the massive weight of Uncle's wedding band." Rich is observing the inequality in the dichotomy of the sexes. Unfortunately, at this point, she has caged her tigers in strict meter and rhyme. In this cage, they are still Aunt Jennifer's tigers and bear no relationship to her own.

Another poem, "An Unsaid Word," also deals, in a disturbing manner, with the traditional subservient position of the woman who must wait quiescently for the man to delineate the terms of their relationship. Although the

poem restates the standard rhetoric to be found in any women's magazine of the time, it does it uneasily. The word choices make clear the alienation between the two people involved.

She who has power to call her man
From that estranged intensity
Where his mind forages alone,
Yet keeps her peace and leaves him free,
And when his thoughts to her return
Stands where he left her, still his own,
Knows this the hardest thing to learn.

There is clearly a separation in "that estranged intensity / Where his mind forages alone." He can be an individual free to explore any options, but she must remain stagnant until he comes back to her. Rich can see that this woman's behavior is not natural. It must be learned, and because it goes against any innate sense of self-worth, it is "the hardest thing to learn." It is apparent that Rich is beginning to discern some of the qualities of sexual relationships in a patriarchal society, but she has accepted the societal interpretations of them for so long that she is not yet ready to deal with their consequences for women. As Helen Vendler says, in reference to some of the works in this volume, "The poems articulated their own balance between danger and decorum in imagery of rebellion (which

usually lost) against tradition (which usually won, at least tonally)" (238).

"Mathilde in Normandy" is Adrienne Rich's first poem to consider women in any historical context. The context Rich places women in, however, is the traditional one. In this piece once more "Lords abandoned / The fields and apple trees of Normandy / For harsher hunting on the opposite coast." And, as usual when war called the men the "women sat at home / To the pleasing minor airs of lute and hautbois." These women sat weaving a great tapestry to commemorate the battle and to keep their minds from the death which accompanies any confrontation of this kind. Fear is woven into the tapestry and "anxiety there too / Played havoc with the skein, and the knots came." So far, this is a standard tale of men at war and women tending the homefires. What takes this poem beyond the commonplace is the irony that Rich perceives in relation to the tapestry. Although the battle was being celebrated, as the history of men usually is, it is "the patient handiwork of long-sleeved ladies" that actually survives. This handiwork is now better known and more significant than the event that initiated it. It is truly ironic "that this should prove / More than the personal episode, more than all / The little lives sketched on the teeming loom." Rich goes no deeper than this in her considerations at this time. Once again she gives in her poem only a surface observation of life.

Rich is not avoiding a deeper look at these areas of patriarchal society. They do not actually exist for her yet as problems. That she has even begun to note them is a surge in consciousness. She is so concerned with the forms and the objectivity of her poetry that she seems almost incapable of delving anymore into the subjects.

In her poem, "At a Bach Concert" she speaks about her own relationship to her art when she says that, "Form is the ultimate gift that love can offer-- / The vital union of necessity / With all that we desire, all that we suffer." She believes that by separating herself from what she is creating she is accomplishing her function as a poet. Her conception that "A too-compassionate art is half an art. / Only such proud restraining purity / Restores the else-betrayed, too-human heart" effectively removes her and her emotions from her work. Albert Gelpi echoes the idea of most of Rich's modern critics when he states that,

> After a while the reader begins to wonder if the artifice, no matter how skillfully wrought, may serve as a partial evasion of the conflicts which are the subject of the poem ("Poetics" 131).

This same quality can be observed in Adrienne Rich's next book of poetry.

The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems, Rich's second volume of poems, came out in 1955. Here again is a work that is imitative and follows the time-honored methods of

construction of poetic pieces. The emphasis is still on craft. Rich's themes are still generalized and she is still seeking to appeal to universal concerns. The first section of the book, "Letter from the Land of Sinners," centers on her travels through Europe. It is in this section that Rich first begins to look at the entity of history. Although she does not yet see the falsity of it, Richard Howard perceives that in these poems Rich is "adding history to the list of alienating forces that, like weather, are just too much for the lorn self and its untrustworthy instruments" (428). The specific history that Rich is considering here is that which she encounters and tries to integrate with her own during her European travels.

Although Adrienne Rich seeks in these poems to find her own connection in the inexorable flow of "men" and time, she cannot make those ties. In "The Tourist and the Town" Rich finds that,

> There is a mystery that floats between
> The tourist and the town. Imagination
> Estranges it from her. She need not suffer
> Or die here. It is none of her affair,
> Its calm heroic vistas make no claim.
> Her bargains with disaster have been sealed
> In another country. Here she goes untouched,
> And this is alienation.

Consistently, this theme appears in poems such as "Ideal Landscape" and "Villa Adriana" where Rich is attempting to define the desire that leads to:

> dreamers searching for an answer,
> Passionately in need to reconstruct
> The columned roofs under the blazing sky,
> The courts so open, so forever locked.

Always there is a sense of aloneness in a foreign country, of a will to become part of something unknown and possibly unknowable.

Rarely in the first section, or in the two that follow, does Rich touch on those themes that would later dominate her work. The state of women is glossed over in favor of poems on the eternal theme of the vagaries of love. Marriage is briefly viewed in "The Middle-aged." This poem is approached from the safe vantage point of judging others' lives in retrospect. Rich sees, with some disillusionment, that there are hidden facets of marriage that youth is never privy to. There are things shared "all memory, / Signs of possession and of being possessed, / We tasted, tense with envy." The intimate knowledge of marriage can be felt, but never known by children until they have themselves been exposed to the concessions necessary to coexistence. Only then can it "all be understood by us, returning / Late, in our own time--how that peace was made, / Upon what terms, with how much left unsaid."

The disillusionment visible in "The Middle-aged" surfaces again in "Living in Sin," the only truly woman-centered poem in this volume. Rich addresses the misconceptions, the fairy tale endings that women are brought up to believe. The woman in the poem "had thought the studio would keep itself; / no dust upon the furniture of love." The reality of daily living never enters her idealistic picture. Love is the nights. It does not include the fact that the "morning light / so coldly would delineate the scraps / of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles," or that he, upon awakening, "shrugged at the mirror, / rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes." Rich is still too removed from her topic and involved in the mechanics of her craft to draw any pertinent conclusions from this brief insight. The ending, therefore, is traditional, though telling. For "By evening she was back in love again, / though not so wholly but throughout the night / she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming." No change accompanies this new knowledge. Rich is not a part of this world but only an objective reporter.

The last and title poem of this book, "The Diamond Cutters," restates Adrienne Rich's attitudes toward her art. The "stone" in the poem is a clear metaphor for poetry. The advice that the author gives the cutter contains the same basic tenets that Rich is using to approach her own work. All of her instructions, "be

serious," "be hard of heart," "be proud," necessitate a removal of self from the work. She is clearly saying that:

> Although you liberate
> Pure and expensive fires
> Fit to enamor Shebas,
> Keep your desire apart.

Albert Gelpi notes that in this poem is "the poet's continuing attitude toward the submission of experience to the artistic process . . ." (133). This position is not abandoned in any of her preceding work. Rich hones her process to a fine precision. She follows her own dictates to "respect the adversary, / Meet it with tools refined, / And thereby set your price."

In his foreword to A Change of World, W. H. Auden warns that "the typical danger for poets in our age is, perhaps, the desire to be 'original'" (8). His praise of Adrienne Rich's work hinges, in part, on her ability to produce poetry based on "craftsmanship" and "tradition" rather than on an attempt at originality. Auden's assessment of Rich's works holds true for both A Change of World and The Diamond Cutters, although not for her later work. Curiously enough, Auden himself predicts the circumstances that will engender a new type of expression from Rich. In elaborating on why any originality in the poetry of the 1950's would be forced and false, Auden states that,

> radical changes and significant novelty in artistic style can only occur when there has been a radical change in human sensibility to require them. . . . So long as the way in which we regard the world and feel about our existence remains in all essentials the same as that of our predecessors we must follow in their tradition. . . . (8-9)

According to Auden, no change of this magnitude had occurred since World War I and he did not foresee any comparable event in the future. It is doubtful that he would have accepted the notion of women instigating any such alteration in the fabric of society. It was, however, just such a circumstance which would release Rich from the strictures of a patriarchal-based poetry. When the "radical change," which occurred in the 1960's, was named, it was called the Women's Liberation Movement.

Long before Adrienne Rich became involved in feminism as a movement, she became aware of the patriarchal basis of the problem. Her awareness began with her marriage in 1953 to Alfred H. Conrad and the subsequent births of her three sons. She was no longer just an "exceptional" woman. She was now a part of the traditional establishment. Rich was expected to assume the roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, not only by the community, but in her own mind as well. Her mother's example had taught Rich which priorities

were to be hers. The role of poet had to be subjugated to her other roles. These demands would keep her from publishing another book for eight years. As Rich later explained in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,"

> But to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way <u>is</u> in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination . . . I had thought I was choosing a full life: the life available to most men, in which sexuality, work, and parenthood could coexist. . . . I wanted, then, more than anything, the one thing of which there was never enough: time to think, time to write. (43-44)

When Rich did not have the time she needed to create, she began to examine the reasons why. Her preliminary explorations became the focal point of her next book.

CHAPTER III

NAMING THE PROBLEM

In 1963 Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law was published. This volume and the five volumes of poetry that follow it are transitional works for Adrienne Rich. During this period in her life, Rich becomes cognizant of herself not as an "exceptional" woman, but as a woman just as bound by the patriarchal system as any other "ordinary" woman. The restraints she perceives permeating her domestic life begin to make her question the previously unacknowledged restraints that bind her poetic life. Through her questioning, Rich attempts, as Williard Spiegelman notes, "a journey from one self, world, poetic form, to another" (374). These six books, Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, Necessities of Life, Leaflets, The Will to Change, Diving into the Wreck and Poems: Selected and New, are a record of Rich's "journey."

In these books, Adrienne Rich names the patriarchal system as the main problem inhibiting women's development. Later, in her prose work, she defines this structure as,

> the power of the fathers: a familiar-social, ideological, political system in which men--by force, direct pressure, or through ritual tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette,

> education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (Woman 57)

She examines this problem and its history. She discerns its effect on women and in trying to recount this new knowledge, she becomes aware of the inadequate and biased language available for her use. Adrienne Rich, as a woman and a poet, is entering into her own poetry.

Rich's contention with this process of identification and growth is slow and often painful. She struggles with each step. At first Rich is not conscious that she is beginning to take a new approach to her poetry; consequently, male influences are still apparent in the earlier volumes. Only in retrospect is Adrienne Rich able to see that,

> In the late fifties I was able to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman. The poem ["Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law"] was jotted in fragments during children's naps, brief hours in a library, or at 3:00 A.M. after rising with a wakeful child. I despaired of doing any continuous work at this time. Yet I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper

> at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be "universal," which meant, of course, nonfemale. ("When We Dead," 44)

Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law is a reflection of Rich's confusion. New insights often necessitate change, and change can mean a total disruption of the comfortable patterns of life. Even if this disruption is necessary to personal growth, it can be frightening. The inevitable consequences can rarely be predicted. This fear is evident in Rich's first poem of this volume. In "From Morning-Glory to Petersburg," Rich's fear of her burgeoning consciousness surfaces when she states,

> Now knowledge finds me out;
> in all its risible untidiness
> it traces me to each address,
> dragging in things I never thought about.
> I don't invite what facts can be
> held at arm's length; a family
> of jeering irresponsibles always
> comes along gypsy style
> and there you have them all
> forever on your hands. It never pays.

This poem, written in 1954, predates the title poem of the volume, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" by four years. Rich is still struggling with her new knowledge in 1958 when she begins work on "Snapshots."

The new questions Adrienne Rich asks herself strongly influence "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." How is <u>woman</u> defined by history (men)? How is she defined by other women? Can one be a woman and still be creative? The answers that Rich arrives at here are not reassuring. As Wendy Martin notes,

> the title poem explores the female heritage of dissipated energy, dependency and self-hate. The poem chronicles the fragmented lives of women who live vicariously through men, who are excessively crippled by their emotional and economic dependency on men . . . . ("Patriarchy" 176)

In the poem, a mother, "once a belle of Shreveport," her "mind now moldering like wedding cake," and a daughter, who "grows another way," are both thwarted by the societal stifling of their creativity; "their gifts no pure fruition, but a thorn." They are both pinned down by love and by their acceptance of the suffocating conditions of their love for men. They take their antagonism out on each other, not realizing where the real blame should be placed.

Quotes by Emily Dickinson and Mary Wollstonecraft reinforce the difficulty for these women of expressing any new or independent thought without provoking male censure. The common women who have absorbed the male ideas of a woman's purpose will join in condemning their uncommon

sisters.

Juxtaposed with the Dickinson and Wollstonecraft quotes are quotes by Diderot, Samuel Johnson, and Horace which offer the traditional view of a woman as a sweet, beautiful mindless creature who sings only when "neither words nor music are her own." Rich recognizes that women are being dominated by this male historical concept when,

> Bemused by gallantry, we hear
> our mediocrities over-praised,
> indolence read as abnegation,
> slattern thought styled intuition,
> every lapse forgiven, our crime
> only to cast too bold a shadow
> or smash the mold straight off.

There is no solution as yet apparent to Rich, although her incipient feminist yearnings do see a change, if not <u>for</u> women, at least initially, <u>in</u> women. The problem is that "she's long about her coming, who must be / more merciless to herself than history."

This title poem is a breakthrough for Adrienne Rich. She is making an attempt to deal specifically with her own state of being a woman. There is an obvious struggle with the newly born idea of male influence and its acceptance by females. The ending of the poem loses power because Rich herself is not yet ready to give up her confined creativity for the free expression of herself and

her sex. The results of this kind of individual affirmation, as Rich says in the poem, are "solitary confinement, / tear gas, attrition shelling. / Few applicants for that honor." She does, however, state that there is a problem. She is questioning.

Several other poems in this book concern a woman's role in society. "The Afterwake" treats the expectation that women will nurture and succor others, particularly their men and children, at the expense of their own energy. In "A Marriage in the Sixties" Rich initiates the question of separate existences within the confines of marriage. The impossibility of woman as poet/creator is again considered in "The Roofwalker." Rich realizes that she is accepted by the establishment as long as she sustains her carefully wrought universality and style, but she cannot grow as a poet within these fences. She asks, "was it worthwhile to lay-- / with infinite exertion-- / a roof I can't live under." She is a poet not only by choice but by necessity, "a life I didn't choose / chose me," so she must retain this aspect of herself in order to remain a whole person.

The question of history that Rich briefly broached in her two previous books of poetry takes on a new significance in this volume. This is particularly evident in "Readings of History." Rich is beginning to examine history in order to find some indications of where she belongs in the world. She is asking how history has created

the society that now exists. Are we "prisoners of what we think occurred, / or dreamers dreaming toward a final word?" Rich is diffident in her search, for as she observes in "Prospective Immigrants Please Note,"

> Either you will
> go through the door
> or you will not go through.
>
> If you go through
> there is always the risk
> of remembering your name. . . .
>
> The door itself makes no promises.
> It is only a door.

The new concerns Rich is broaching in these poems are matched by a change in her style of expression. Her lines are looser, free of the strict scansion she previously exhibited (as can be noted in the previously mentioned poems). The diction follows the same trend as Rich endeavors to find language that can explicate emotions intrinsic to experience. These innovations are the most noteworthy aspects of Snapshots; however, they are not the whole of the book.

Adrienne Rich has not made a complete break with her previous writing. The changes in her concerns and her style are gradual, so this book also has poems where her old style

is evident. In many poems, such as "The Knight," The Loser," and "Antinous: The Diaries," the universal male persona is used to mask the female considerations of Rich. Even the influence of other male poets can still be seen. "The Loser" is strongly reminiscent of much of Yeats' work. Each book forward for Rich will carry less of this baggage from the past. As she becomes comfortable with a more intimate kind of communication and with her topics of woman and self, she has less need for this hindering facade.

Necessities of Life, Adrienne Rich's fourth book of poetry, was released in 1966. This book is marked by Rich's constant references to a death of old values and ideas, and an eventual rebirth of self. She is still floundering in the sea of identity. She must replace her old beliefs with new ones, as yet unidentified. Wendy Martin notes that "Rich pares away the layers of social conditioning, ritualized roles and programmed responses in order to locate the core of self, the essentials of her existence" (Adrienne Rich 179). To do this, she must examine and either accept or reject her past. During this stage, she becomes "strongly committed to autobiography, to poetry as an instrument of personal resolve and clarification . . ." (Kalstone 130). Rich finally and fully enters into her own poetry. She is, most often, the I in her own work.

Adrienne Rich's emergence into her new life "piece by piece" is not without hazard or fear, as she delineates

in the title poem, "Necessities of Life." As she searches history for role models and some kind of identification "whole biographies swam up and / swallowed me like Jonah." She feared losing herself once more and in response she says, "I learned to make myself / unappetizing . . ." until "I'll / dare inhabit the world / trenchant in motion as an eel, solid / as a cabbage head." She is not ready for a commitment to a new philosophy. First she must examine the old and "now and again to name / over the bare necessities."

Something of the old dies off in each new poem she offers here. In "Like This Together" Rich discusses the possible death of love when common interests diverge:

> They're tearing down the houses
> we met and lived in,
> soon our two bodies will be all
> left standing from that era.

Communication breaks down and "our words misunderstand us." Love, the undefinable emotion, like

> Dead winter doesn't die,
> it wears away, a piece of carrion
> picked clean at last,
> rained away or burnt dry.

The only action that can save this death is "our fierce attention."

Rich labors against another kind of death in "After Dark." She combats the physical death of her father even as

she recognizes that she has longed for the death of his influence over her. She realizes that by accepting his definition of her, she became "self maimed." She followed a direction not her own,

stopped singing a whole year,
got a new body, new breath,
got children, croaked for words,
forgot to listen.

In "Night-Pieces: For a Child" even the accepted condition of motherhood begins to die: "Mother I no more am, / but woman, and nightmare." Rich is growing away from this identification of self through others. She is moving out into the world as she metaphorically states in "The Trees": "The trees inside are moving out into the forest, / the forest that was empty all these days." This move cannot be accomplished without some loss. The loss is in the death of old influences. The gain is the ability to reassess all that she had accepted as true and inevitable.

The power of language between the sexes is first approached here in the poem "Face to Face." Rich, as David Kalstone observes, "imagines a new condition of speech, modeled on the exchange between pioneer figures, a husband and wife about to be reunited after a long separation" (138). These people anticipate and dread this meeting. The consequences are great, for "the poem hopes for the nourishment of a marriage through the charged revelation of

the inner life . . ." (Kalstone 138). This may be demanding too much of the language as they stand there:

> "and each with his God-given secret.
> spelled out through the months of snow and silence,
> burning under the bleached scalp: behind dry lips
> a loaded gun."

As in the poem, "Like This Together," Rich is looking once more at the need for communication between the sexes. Gradually she is becoming aware of the difficulties of men and women to make themselves understood by the other. The idea that there may be a problem in the exchange of thoughts simply because the language and its use differs with each sex has already taken root.

In "Two Songs," written in 1965, Adrienne Rich initiates this possibility when she mentions that men speak "in a different language / yet one I've picked up / through cultural exchanges. . . ." Rich sees the same phenomenon that the linguists Penelope and Wolfe point out, when they say that males see,

> the world in terms of categories, dichotomies, roles, stasis, and causation, while female expressive modes reflect an epistomology that perceives the world in terms of ambiguities, pluralities, processes, continuities, and complex relationships. (126)

These perceptions control the language that is used by each sex. Although Rich cannot verbalize the dichotomy as explicitly as these linguists do, she does recognize that there is a difference in use. The contemplation of language will become even more intense in Adrienne Rich's next book, Leaflets, as she enters into the struggle of trying to find the words for her experience and for her anger.

By the time Leaflets is published in 1969, Rich is moving through a search for self into an active participation in society. Adrienne Rich has found herself and she is defining that self as woman and poet. During this process she is judging the culture around her and finds it wanting. She realizes that for her to develop to her fullest potential there must be change. Martin observes that,

> No longer does she differentiate her personal experience from political reality; her life is part of a larger social reality, and her poems in this volume explore the possibilities for reweaving the fabric of our private and public lives (Adrienne Rich 556).

As she becomes more involved in this "reweaving" process, she writes her poetry with the concrete intention of changing people's lives. The tools she uses are language and style. In this book of poetry she scrutinizes and experiments with both to achieve the most effective results

to show the anger and helplessness she feels during these unsettled times. The Vietnam War is raging; students, blacks and women demand changes in society's long-guarded hierarchy; senseless, every day violence is the norm; and words are the only weapons Rich has to combat this.

As early as 1966, Adrienne Rich sees the language used as a reflection of the society it is used in. "Only where there is language is there world," says Rich in "The Demon Lover." And again she states, "We are our words." As Dale Spender notes in Man Made Language,

> Language is our means of classifying and ordering the world: our means of manipulating reality. In its structure and in its use we bring our world into realization, and if it is inherently inaccurate, then we are misled. (2).

Rich knows the power of words. She knows that she can be moved by words easier than by violence:

> A voice presses at me.
> If I give in it won't
> be like the girl the bull rode,
> all Rubens flesh and happy moans.
> But to be wrestled like a boy
> with tongue, hips, knees, nerves, brain . . .
> with language?

"Implosions," one of the best known poems from this volume, blatantly states Rich's intention: "I wanted to

choose words that even you / would have to be changed by." Her message to society is also clear. When she states, "All wars are useless to the dead," she says nothing startling and she is aware of that. She struggles to achieve a new connection that will elucidate the similarities between the wars countries engage in and the wars between men and women. There is true death implicit in both and no one wins. The words and images do not come easily. The thought that perhaps the common language used between the sexes is not common after all begins to occupy Adrienne Rich.

The poem "On Edges" contains a clear image of this dichotomy of meaning:

> Now you hand me a torn letter.
> On my knees, in the ashes, I could never
> fit these ripped up flakes together.
> In the taxi I am still piecing
> what syllables I can
> translating at top speed like a thinking machine
> that types out <u>useless</u> as <u>monster</u>
> and <u>history</u> as <u>lampshade</u>.
> Crossing the bridge I need all my nerve
> to trust to the man-made cables.

She has created a metaphor for her growing distrust of the man-made language.

Suzanne Juhasz observes Rich's new perspectives in this volume. Juhasz offers that,

> The change in Rich's thinking about language and its relation to society must necessarily lead to changes in her own poetry . . . now she sees the essential rather than the arbitrary or superficial connection between public and private. She begins to place the thematic focus directly upon the "lover's bed" but still has the problem of having to make the connections with language. (194)

Juhasz goes on further to show that Rich's struggle with language manifests itself in her experiments with form. The poem "Nightbreak" is a good example of this.

Rich's anger in "Nightbreak" proclaims itself in the short broken lines, incomplete thoughts, and violent images:

> Something broken Something
> I need By someone
> I love Next year
> will I remember what
> This anger unreal
> yet
> has to be gone through

These images are vivid and violent because once Rich realizes that words are not always accurate she attempts to paint images that cannot be misinterpreted. The pain she feels comes alive when she writes,

> my body is a list of wounds
> symmetrically placed

a village
blown open by planes
that did not finish the job.

These same experiments continue in the title poem, "Leaflets," which is a striking commentary on the destruction inherent in the tumultuous times and the waste of what is good in that destruction. The philosophy that she applies to the times echoes the philosophy underlying her poetry: "I am thinking how we can use what we have / to invent what we need."

Adrienne Rich's involvement with the war politics of the era delay her consideration of women's history. In Leaflets she is still identifying with and reflecting upon the singular "exceptional" woman, the woman or women directly relevant to her own life and work. By looking back on these past lives, she gathers information on the state of women, particularly creative women, through the years. The inequities assail her. "For a Russian Poet" illustrates the commonality between two women poets and their core sensibilities, that precludes the interference of differing nationalities and politics. "Charleston in the Eighteen-Sixties" and "Sisters" break no new ground; however, the poem "Poem of Women" looks back to the antagonism women can feel for those who try to escape the confines of tradition. "Poem of Women" is not an original work of Rich's, but an adaption from a Yiddish work of Kadia Molodovsky. The

inclusion of this piece in Leaflets signifies the still confused nature of Rich's relations with the women of her past and the mass of women that surround her.

The story of a woman whose history was lost is offered in "Planetarium," a poem in Adrienne Rich's sixth book, The Will to Change. "Planetarium" recalls the discoveries of Caroline Herschel, an astronomer who never received the credit for her discoveries. Rich identifies with Herschel's persistence in her field despite non-recognition. The resentment that Rich feels towards a society that refuses to acknowledge competence because a woman has done the work is muted but still there. When Rich makes her connection with Herschel, she also makes a connection with the discrimination that was evident: "I am an instrument in the shape / of a woman trying to translate pulsations into images for the relief of the body / and the reconstruction of the mind."

The Will to Change, published in 1971, has the failure of language as one of its most pervasive themes. Albert Gelpi notes that,

> Necessities of Life (1966), Leaflets (1969) and The Will to Change (1971) are better books than Snapshots; they move steadily and with growing success toward making a poetry which is not just an activity consonant with life but an act essential to it" ("Poetics" 139).

If poetry is essential to Rich's life, and language is the basis of poetry, the frustration Rich exhibits because she cannot make the words say what she wants, is understandable. The sense of struggle that Rich is still feeling is apparent not only in the context of the poems, but also in the further experimentation with form.

The lines of the poems in this volume vary significantly in length. Adrienne Rich is no longer concerned with meter. Prose poetry combines with free verse, and pauses are a more important aspect of the verse form. "Shooting Script" is a series of numbered, dated poems. The form of the poem is an effective variation on the more well-known free verse styles. Rich is working with a series of single images which merge and flow together into a whole concept. Section I is particularly directed to the problem of language. The stress is on the conceptual aspects of language and its power to effect change.

> The wave changed instantly by the rock; the rock changed
> by the wave returning over and over. . . .
>
> The conversation of sounds melting constantly into rhythms.
>
> A cycle whose rhythm begins to change the meanings of words
>
> The meaning that searches for its word like a hermit crab

A shell penetrated by meaning.

Language can effect change but only if the meaning is clear to all.

In its first stanza, "Images for Godard" speaks of Ludwig Wittgenstein's simile of language as a city. Rich, however, sees the problem of "Driving to the limits / of the city of words." This is the place where women have arrived. Traditional communication has checked the social and emotional maturation of women. Now a reformation must occur, for when "we come to the limits / of the city / my face must have a meaning." Judith McDaniel writes on the unavoidable solution to Rich's quandry when she ascertains that,

> Rich must first create a new language, a new way to express women's experience. The task is enormous, but not impossible; for she means to shape this new language, not through words, but through new perceptions, so that we may first see ourselves in the new place. (12)

"The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" is another poem about language--another poem about the failure of language and the pain that follows it. The constant attempts to complete communication are so draining on Rich that she wishes for,

an age of long silence

relief

from this tongue this slab of limestone
or reinforced concrete.

Even though the fatigue of struggle is evident, Rich tries to make contact with the only words available to her: "this is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you." To give up the struggle for clarity of meaning is to accept the status quo of all of society. Language, in Adrienne Rich's writing, has already become the metaphor for the patriarchal system and she cannot surrender to the system. She continues to work with her only tools despite the fact that "the typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you / and this is the oppressor's language." The images that Rich uses in the poem to make her concepts come alive are fledgling attempts at the "new perceptions" that McDaniels refers to.

As Adrienne Rich becomes involved in the women's movement in the early 1970's, her perceptions sharpen. She begins to look at the patriarchal system's effects on all women, not just on herself. She realizes that although the language problem is a major barrier, it is not the only obstacle women must overcome in their search for equality.

In 1973 Rich released one of the major books of her career, Diving into the Wreck. Because of the excellence and influence of this volume, it won the National Book Award in 1975. This work is a major statement by Rich on:

> Poetry and patriarchy. The problem of women in a patriarchal society. That is, in part, what Diving into the Wreck is about. Yet it is not about patriarchy in a narrowly political sense. Rich is one of the few poets who can deal with political issues in her poems without letting them degenerate into socialist realism because her notion of politics is not superficial; it is essentially psychological and organic. (Jong 171)

Rich tries to determine for herself, and for all women, how individual identity can be developed in this culture. The title poem, "Diving into the Wreck," is a compendium of the discoveries that are made when Rich examines cultural myths of the past and the present. This step must be taken in order to be able to create a new basis of self-worth and societal significance for women. What Rich discovers in her descent into the patriarchal establishment is shattering enough to initiate an anger that pervades many of the other poems in the book. As Carol Christ notes,

> The experience of nothingness and the courage to see are at the heart of the poems in Diving into

> the Wreck. The "wreck" into which the poet dives is the dark underside of marriage and politics in the patriarchal world. Beneath the myths of civility, love, and power wielded to protect, Rich discovers a landscape of terror. Emotional distance and control turn to violence in men; self-effacement smolders into consuming rage in women. (76)

This is a "landscape of terror" for women simply because it is an unknown world. Rich's intention in descending into the wreck is not only to bring back the truth of the myth of male supremacy, but, in doing so, to rewrite this myth and bring women into it. She is, in a sense, giving women back their own place in history. This is the female quest.

One essential element of the quest is the journey itself. Rich begins "Diving into the Wreck" by stressing the difficulty of the dive. Though she has prepared herself with all that society can offer in the way of protection and instruments of understanding, these items prove to be inadequate to help her plumb these depths. The "book of myths," her map, can only yield knowledge to the men that it was written for. The knife and camera are male instruments that are of no use to the female carrying them. Rich is not just taking pictures of the "wreck" to exhibit when she returns. The knowledge of the wreck that she seeks she will

first experience on a personal, emotional level. The knife is a symbol of the violence of purpose that is alien to her intentions. The dive is dangerous, but the danger is not primarily physical. Rich makes her intentions clear:

> I came to explore the wreck.
> The words are purposes.
> The words are maps.
> I came to see the damage that was done
> and the treasures that prevail. . . .
> the thing I came for:
> the wreck and not the story of the wreck
> the thing itself and not the myth.

She finds the "wreck," the rotting remnants of patriarchal supremacy and realizes that as a woman submitting to the established norms she is also one of the drowned crew. The only survivors of the "wreck" are the androgynes:

> We are, I am, you are
> by cowardice or courage
> the one who find our way
> back to this scene
> carrying a knife, a camera
> a book of myths
> in which
> our names do not appear.

At this point in her feminist development, Rich sees the salvation of women in the development of androgyny. She

has accepted that she has male characteristics and has integrated them successfully into her psyche. She is concerned now with having this fact acknowledged and reciprocated by the male establishment. Rich describes her perceptions of this condition in "The Stranger." She also speaks of the anger that encompasses her when she realizes that males cannot identify women in this way:

> . . . I've walked before
> like a man, like a woman, in the city
> my visionary anger cleansing my sight . . .
>
> I am the androgyne
> I am the living mind you fail to describe
> in your dead language
> the lost noun, the verb surviving
> only in the infinitive.

"The Phenomenology of Anger" is dominated by Adrienne Rich's rage. The repressed emotion of her helplessness to change the system erupts. Woman is "the compromised" filled with "self-hatred" because of "the shallowness of a life lived in exile." Sometimes the only options appear to be "Madness. Suicide. Murder. / Is there no way out but these?" She wants to burn away the body of this "killer" so that she will be,

> burning away his lie
> leaving him in a new

world; a changed

man.

Hate pervades this work as Rich emphasizes the awakening reality that,

> the only real love I have ever felt
> was for children and other women.
> Everything else was lust, pity,
> self-hatred, pity, lust.

Rich is plumbing the source emotions which women have been forced to repress, but from which their conscious actions have originated, and naming them.

Other poems in the volume name other reasons for her anger. In "Trying to Talk with a Man," the failure of language to allow communication resurfaces as it did in "The Stranger." "When We Dead Awaken" and "Waking in the Dark" emphasize a separateness between the sexes that cannot be reconciled. Once more the language is a problem, but it is only the verbal metaphor for the inability of men to identify with the emotional levels that are the undercurrents of women's existence. Even a sensitive genius such as Beethoven could not bridge this gap. Rich determines in "The Ninth Symphony of Beethoven Understood at Last as a Sexual Message," that he created "music / trying to tell something the man / does not want out, would keep if he could." Rich is referring to the emotional reactions curtailed by men as only fitting for females. Rich is

delving deeply into the "wreck" that females must contend with. There must be comprehension before there can be solutions.

Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974 was published in 1975. Two new and important poems are included in this collection of previously published works. Rich makes two comprehensive statements, one on the history of women and one on the language of women. Just as this volume sums up the growth in Adrienne Rich's poetry, so do these two poems contain the conclusions she has reached during her transitional period of writing.

Rich has progressed from a structured, heavily male-influenced poetry concerned with universal (non-female) themes to an unstructured, feminist poetry that names the primary problem in society as the patriarchal system that governs it. She has begun to be concerned about the state of all women because she has recognized her problems as their problems. In her quest for new language to describe the state of being a woman, she has realized that there has been no true recounting of women to necessitate the development of that language. The women she has studied and written about were powerless to enter into society on their own terms and to have their ideas and experiences accepted. Therefore, these women-centered concepts neither entered language nor the cultural fabric of civilization. Until this time, Rich has concentrated principally on the effect

of the system on her personal development and, only incidently, on the mass of women. Once she has recapitulated her definition of the problem and explored her own powers in affecting change, she will proceed to the next logical step of implementing change.

She attempted in Leaflets and the succeeding books to reach not only the female psyche but also the male psyche through her poetry. In Poems she first begins to talk primarily to women. She realizes that only women can aid themselves and other women in reconstructing the basic patterns of culture.

"From an Old House in America" is Adrienne Rich's search for the lost women in history. This poem, that ends the book, begins Rich's reaching out to all women. As says Judith McDaniel,

> The road, for American women has been grotesquely difficult; and in a series of breathtaking vignettes Rich does indeed look back on the road to watch her own birth. Slaves, witches, pioneers, women chained together, hung together, or dying alone, whatever the history of individual lives has been, each was a victim of a power that took her life out of her own control. (19-20)

The "house" is a metaphor for history and the women who have inhabited this house have never inhabited the history that is recounted in the schools.

Rich identifies with the lost creativity she discerns when,

> turning through the contents of a drawer:
> these rusted screws, this empty vial
> useless, this box of water color paints
> dried to insolubility--

She makes a physical connection: "I place my hand on the hand / of the dead, invisible palmprint / on the doorframe." When Adrienne Rich says, "I am an American woman," she becomes all women who have come before her. She lives their pain from the first "foot slogging through the Bering Strait" to the:

> isolation
> from other women, so much
> in the mining camps, the first cities
> the Great Plains winters.

Rich discovers, through the telling, that history repeats and still exists:

> If you do not believe
> that fear and hatred
> read the lesson again
> in old dialect.

This history of pain and perseverance has been lost. Women cannot learn from it nor pass beyond it until they know it. Rich marks each century, each abuse for,

I do not want to simplify
Or: I would simplify

by naming the complexity
It was made over-simple all along
the separation of powers
the allotment of sufferings.

Rich sees wholeness now only in the joining with other women, past, present and future. She realizes that "any woman's death diminishes me," particularly a death of the individual flame of creativity, accomplishment.

Adrienne Rich's conscious wrestling with language continues in the poem "Tear Gas," the second of the significant poems in this volume. As in "From an Old House in America," this poem, too, approaches one of Rich's much worried topics from a new perspective. Although she has examined and condemned the dichotomy in language in many poems she has never made a conscious effort to remedy this ill. In "Tear Gas" she steps back to face her reluctance and sees the fear that has kept her from this task. Here she comes to an epiphany:

I am alone, alone with language
and without meaning
coming back to something written years ago:
<u>our words misunderstand us</u>
wanting a word that will shed itself like a tear

onto the page
leaving its stain.

Creating new images for women to reference is not enough. Rich knows that they must be able to hear the words, read the words that will immediately communicate emotions and experiences. She herself needs to define what she wants from words before she can begin to create language. And so she begins to define:

I need a language to hear myself with
to see myself in
a language like pigment released on the board
blood-black, sexual greens, reds
veined with contradictions
bursting under pressure from the tube
staining the old grain of the wood
like sperm or tears
but this is not what I mean
these images are not what I mean
(I am afraid).

She says that she has failed, but by doing so she releases herself from the fear of trying. In her next book, The Dream of a Common Language, Adrienne Rich comes to the resolution to exercise her own knowledge and experience to create a language that women can use and understand.

CHAPTER IV

SPEAKING THE "COMMON LANGUAGE"

The year 1978 brought the release of Adrienne Rich's ninth book of poetry, The Dream of a Common Language. This book is a new beginning for Rich. The period of transition is over. No longer is she searching for herself in relation to the patriarchal aggregate. Her rejection of the system has led to total disassociation with the possibility of it being altered by the men who adhere to its values. Her poetry comes to fruition as she begins to affirm herself and all women as complete in themselves. She believes that the only hope for women is in collective action.

If women can know themselves and live truthfully in that knowledge then, because of sheer numbers and societal pressures, changes will come. Rich begins, says Vanderbosch, "to define the human in terms of the female, not the female in terms of the human" (114). Women will not endeavor to fit into the male civilization, but will create a new definition of society. Rich assists in creating this definition by supplying the language necessary to it. To create this language, Adrienne Rich concentrates on searching out women's experiences and then naming their dominant meanings in relation only to women. These images

are free of the prescriptive associations that males ascribed to them.

One of the primary images that Rich renames is that of the lesbian. In the mid-1970's Adrienne Rich openly discussed her own lesbianism in her prose work. However, in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" that form the center of The Dream of a Common Language, she first offers this aspect of her life as a subject for poetry. She has numerous reasons for doing this.

First, when she admits that she is a lesbian, she reinforces her total break with the patriarchal system. She is now a part of the fringe of society that men refuse to admit as a potential alternative to heterosexuality. She is a member of "this still unexcavated hole / called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world" where "no one has imagined us."

Another reason that Rich brings this truth into her poetry is to reinforce the community of women by naming all their experiences as women, even those that society deems taboo. She expands this experience to encompass all women when she says that,

> two women together is a work
> nothing in civilization has made simple,
> two people together is a work
> heroic in its ordinariness.

In these poems lesbianism moves beyond a sexual definition to encompass,

> that love for ourselves and other women, that commitment to the freedom of all of us, which transcends the category "sexual preference" and issues of civil rights, to become a politics of asking women's questions, demanding a world in which the integrity of all women--not a chosen few --shall be honored and validated in every aspect of culture. (Rich "Foreword" 17).

The lesbian is an essential part of women's history that has been ignored. Consequently she is also an essential aspect of women's language that has remained undefined by women. Adrienne Rich makes her history available as part of a common history to draw women together. She is giving women back themselves in their everyday ordinariness and naming this as a special kind of power that is significant if they recognize it and join together to use it.

So, The Dream of a Common Language predominantly focuses on language, but, as Martin states, also on,

> the suffering of women separated from community, the joys of collective effort, the need for mutual understanding among women, the desire to name her own experience and to share this knowledge, the

> danger of permitting cultural myths to obscure personality. (Adrienne Rich 569)

Many of these themes have been previewed, but then Rich was exploring for meaning and understanding. Now that she has found the locus of the medium of change, her poems center on disseminating her knowledge to women.

Language must be one of the first areas to be approached in this volume. The choice of the title of this book indicates Rich's desire to,

> create a language in which women's connections to each other are named and celebrated, a language that may transform the patterns of violence and domination perpetrated by the language of men. (Christ 85)

The phrase "the dream of a common language," appears in the poem "The Origins and History of Consciousness." Rich begins this poem deep within her own experience as a woman and poet. The "room" she inhabits here is the space of the mind. She speaks of the needs of her own creativity:

> No one lives in this room
> without confronting the whiteness of the wall
> behind the poems, planks of books,
> photographs of dead heroines.
> Without contemplating last and late
> the true nature of poetry. The drive
> to connect. The dream of a common language.

As a poet she needs this language to make contact with her audience.

Adrienne Rich creates the "common language" when she names "lover" not only as the familiar heterosexual coupling, but just as legitimately as a joining of one woman with another. The loving is, as the poem states, "simple." What is not simple is waiting for society to accept the new definition. This will not happen if only the concept is offered. The naming does not gain "life" until it moves out into the world, or, as Rich says,

> But I can't call it life until we start to move
> beyond this secret circle of fire
> where our bodies are giant shadows flung on a wall
> where the night becomes our inner darkness, and sleeps
> like a dumb beast, head on her paws, in the corner.

Adrienne Rich uses the example of her recently admitted lesbianism as a starting point for naming the unacknowledged experiences of women. Poetry demands truth. By offering the truth of her lesbianism in a female context, she makes it available for other women to identify with in a positive manner: "No one lives in this room / without living through some kind of crisis." For many women that "crisis" is the crisis of identity.

The common experience of the search for identity begins Rich's poem "Natural Resources." The poem recapitulates woman's traditional role and how the ingrained

expectations of that role keep her removed from herself. She is the nurturer that feeds and is fed upon,

and it is she alone who gazes
into the dark of bedrooms, ascertains

how they sleep, who needs her touch
what window blows the ice of February

into the room and who must be protected.

It is only she who sees, who is trained to see.

Women have to give of themselves before they know how much they are actually giving. This connection exists among all women. They have denied their own beings by searching for "the phantom of the man-who-would-understand, / . . . a fellow creature / with natural resources equal to our own." What women are actually contending with is "children picking up guns / for that is what it means to be a man." Of course, that aggression is not always so obvious and

that kind of being has other forms:
a passivity we mistake
--in the desperations of our search--
for gentleness.

This time Rich is not just reciting the same old litany of woes. This time Rich is forcing a "re-vision" by women. This time Rich is offering,

the refusal to be a victim
we have lived with violence so long

Am I to go on saying
for myself, for her

This is my body
take and destroy it?

In naming her new power, Rich rejects the language she had used in the past:

These are words I cannot choose again
humanism androgyny
such words have no shame in them, no diffidence
before the raging stoic grandmothers.

These words do not "permeate / the fibers of actual life / as we live it, now." She no longer wishes the melding of male and female characteristics. Women must accept themselves as they are, confident in their own power: "This is what I am." There is strength in this collective acknowledgment and with it a new definition of power. Rich has,

cast my lot with these
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

"Transcendental Etude" seems to flow simply from the poem "Natural Resources." There is a lyricism and a sense of peace here that can only come from an inner balance between self and the world where one supports and encourages growth in the other. Rich banishes the violence of nature and draws strength from the naive beauty and variety of life. She speaks of the competitiveness that has kept woman from woman, mother from daughter; the enforced isolation that accompanies distrust when these natural bonds are sundered by the patriarchy. Women are torn into pieces and the pieces are distributed to those who request them. Freedom comes from the recognition that there is support in other women, that it is in these everyday examples that women find themselves. Women have long had a "homesickness for a woman, for ourselves." The consequences of "two women, eye to eye / measuring each other's spirit, each other's / limitless desire" can be "a whole new poetry beginning here." Gertrude Reif Hughes suggests that,

> One of Rich's great gifts to her readers--perhaps her most valuable one--has been her discovery that women's love for women is the source of energy to which our access has been most cripplingly blocked and her effort to reclaim that access for us. (153)

The love that both Hughes and Rich speak of is the support and affection that grows out of the recognition of kinship,

out of the realization that no one else will ever know one so completely.

Adrienne Rich presents an example of this love in "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff." These artists, forgotten by history, worked together and inspired each other for two years until they both married. With both their marriages came a certain stifling of artistry, a separation of creative self from domestic self. Since both their husbands were also creative men, a poet and a painter, the women were pressured into placing their husbands' work before their own. Inevitably came the awakening: "But he feeds on us, / like all of them. His whole life, his art / is protected by women. Which of us could say that?" In this imaginary letter, Rich recreates the ancient scenario of submission. Paula Becker pinpoints both the source and loss of power when she says:

> How we used to work
> side by side! And how I've worked since then
> trying to create according to our plan
> that we'd bring, against all odds, our full power
> to every subject. Hold back nothing
> because we were women. Clara, our strength still lies
> in the things we used to talk about:
> how life and death take one another's hands,
> the struggle for truth, our old pledge against guilt.

. . . . I wish we could have done this for each other
all our lives, but we can't . . . .

Domination leeches the life-blood of creativity. Rich, by naming this act, also names the solution to the problem. The ability to break this pattern is within each woman. Women can learn from their history when it is made available to them.

"Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev," celebrates the triumph of the collective effort. This triumph survives even the death of Elvira Shatayev and all the women of her climbing team on Lenin Peak in 1975. The power of these women comes through a commitment to a collective struggle. The words of the poems are ostensibly Elvira's, or rather her spirit's. She speaks to her husband as he climbs to reclaim her body from the snow and she exclaims the success of the women in carrying through their dream. They grew stronger in each other:

> For months for years each one of us
> had felt her own <u>yes</u> growing in her
> slowly forming as she stood at windows . . .
> What we were to learn was simply what we had
> up here as out of all words that <u>yes</u> gathered
> its forces fused itself . . .

Each caesura is a gasping for breath and also for the language to explain the exaltation in "choosing ourselves each other and this life" and having the united power to

implement this choice. Rich shows this is not a death but the beginning of life. This real example of history opens up possibilities to women even as it is related. The wisdom is there for the "re-membrance" of women:

> We know now we have always been in danger
> down in our separateness
> and now up here together but till now
> we had not touched our strength.

In The Dream of a Common Language, Adrienne Rich is giving birth to new language. That birth is not without its labor pains. "Language," says Rich, in "Cartographies of Silence," "cannot do everything." Even the availability of effective language cannot guarantee communication. When the truth is twisted or ignored making the words false, there is pain:

> A conversation begins
> with a lie. And each
>
> speaker of the so-called common language feels
> the ice-floe split, the drift apart.

There is also pain when the truth is lost, not in words, but in silence. Silence can be a conscious evasion, a denial of life. Rich is concerned that,

> Silence can be a plan
> rigorously executed

the blueprint to a life

It is a presence
it has a history a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence.

The silence in women who have reached the point of despair particularly concerns Rich. These women can only be reached by language, but if they refuse to hear, the feeling of futility is overwhelming. There is no breaking through when a woman's pain has become so immersed in itself that "it has ceased to hear itself." Despite the frustration of aborted attempts at communication, Rich still believes in the power of language. She chooses to work with "these words, these whispers, conversations / from which time after time the truth breaks moist and green."

Adrienne Rich's latest book of new poetry, A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far, contains the poems she wrote from 1978 to 1981. These poems, like those in The Dream of a Common Language, are about and for women. The intense concentration on the explanation of the need for new language is missing. In her previous volume, Rich actualized the "common language" that she had long advocated. In this volume Rich refines her naming of women's experiences and increases her "re-membering" of

women's history to aid in the process. She notes the continuing problems of women in this still patriarchal society. Through the telling of late and contemporary history, she again focuses on the forging of connections between women. Wendy Martin comments on this aspect of Rich's poetry when she says,

> Bearing witness to the lost lives of women past and present in a world that has been misused by patriarchal exploitation has been one of the major themes of Adrienne Rich's recent poetry; for her the liberated woman is one who is able to embrace life as process, an unfolding which requires continuous effort and a willingness to confront the quotidion truths . . . . (Ethos 169)

Rich, in A Wild Patience, highlights this process, documents this effort, and illuminates these truths. Concurrent with this endeavor, she is adding to the "common language."

Before Adrienne Rich begins to center on other women, she confronts herself and comes to terms with her own life. This evaluation "in the forty-ninth year of my life / is critical," as she notes in her work "Integrity." She reconciles the diverse parts of herself: "Anger and tenderness: my selves. / And now I can believe they breathe in me / as angels, not polarities." The tenor of the poem clearly indicates that Rich has come to peace with her life and work. The knowledge and experience that she has

garnered is weighed and found to be a full measure. She realizes that all that she has ever had or will ever have or will ever need is the full possession of herself. She speaks of the drive that moves her when she says, "A wild patience has taken me this far / as if I had to bring to shore / a boat with a spasmodic outboard motor." She confronts and accepts herself and now she can,

> steer the boat in, simply.
> The motor dying on the pebbles
> cicadas taking up the hum
> dropped in the silence.

This inner peace is by no means inhibiting Adrienne Rich from continuing the struggle for women through the power of her poetry.

In Rich's latest poems nature comes often to the fore as a place of respite from the struggle. Even more, it is a place of renewal. The ancient bond between earth and woman continues into the present day. The backdrop to the poem "The Spirit of the Place" is just such a mind-calming nature, a return to the solace of the Mother:

> Here in these hills
> this valley we have felt
> a kind of freedom
>
> planting the soil have known
> hours of calm, intense mutual solitude

reading and writing
trying to clarify connect

past and present near and far.

This valley is a place where a woman can learn the patience of the seasons, to "force nothing, be unforced / accept no giant miracles of growth." Rich remarks on how easy it is in this protected environment to yield to the "world as it is if not as it might be / then as it is . . ." The aggression that fueled much of her early work is gone. Age has tempered anger. Rich sees that most profound change comes from the patient accumulation of knowledge of self, of woman, rather than from a bitter inveighing against the other, the man. She wonders now,

Are we all in training for something we don't name?
to exact reparation for things
done long ago to us and to those who did not
survive what was done to them whom we ought to honor
with grief with fury with action.

She no longer seems to know, but "they [the women of the past] are the piece of us that lies out there / knowing knowing knowing." Regularly interspersed throughout the poem, Rich asks, "<u>With whom do you believe your lot is cast?</u>" Is the answer, as it seems to be from this poem, with women, but not against the world? If the women of the

past are the only ones who truly know, then women must study these lives to find the answers to the present.

Adrienne Rich pursues the meaning of women's history in many of the poems in this volume. The meanings of these lives can only be preserved if they are taken into other women's minds and lives. In "For Ethel Rosenberg" and "Grandmothers" the lives of these women are "re-viewed." The futility of their circumscribed existences is revealed. The benign smothering of their individuality is told. The pain is "re-newed" and "re-membered." In another of these poems, "Heroines," Rich reveals the explicit legal and social laws that imprisoned the 19th century woman. This woman's courage in trying to initiate change is asserted, but the knowledge "that it is not enough" continues to haunt the women that came after her.

"Culture and Anarchy" is one of the most effective poems in the collection. A lyrical celebration of the variations in nature alternates with quotations from Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, and Elizabeth Barrett. Nature echoes the intensity of the women's words. Their quiet remarks on everyday accomplishments develop into their rebellions against the loss of women's power. That it is revolt for a woman to want "the solitude and personal / responsibility / of her own individual life" is responded to by "the bursting of the sky / power, release / by sheets by ropes of water, wind." And, yet through the turmoil and

rejection the support of these women was always other women. Their commitment to each other was their strength. This is the connection that Rich is offering and receiving, that women need.

The most important poem in A Wild Patience is Adrienne Rich's last poem of the book. "Turning the Wheel" is a consideration of the need for truth in the "re-membrance" of the history of women. Glorification of people and events can only distort the reality that must descend from the past to the present. This "false history" can even be initiated by a woman "who should know better: / The lesbian archaeologist watches herself sifting her own life out from the shards she's piercing, / asking the clay all questions but her own." Silence about true history is as harmful as the blind seeking of only the glamorous in the past. This search does not permit the past for women's use. It only separates them from it. Rich urges that "in the search of the desert witch, the shamaness / forget the archetypes . . . . / do not pursue the ready-made abstraction, do not peer for symbols." The real woman must be found:

> So long as you want her faceless, without smells
> or voice, so long as she merely symbolizes power
> she is kept helpless and conventional
> her true power routed backward
> into the past, we cannot touch or name her

> and barred from participation by those who need her she stifles in unspeakable loneliness.

A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far brings to fruition all the women-centered concerns that Adrienne Rich has painstakingly become aware of since her first book, A Change of World. This book is a summary of her hopes and fears for all women. The problems of language, history, and women's awareness of themselves and each other still exist, but now Rich has begun to use the "common language" to explicate them. She is writing "everywoman's" story and endeavoring to give "everywoman" an identity. Sara Mandelbaum reaffirms Rich's invaluable contributions when she notes,

> The radicalism of her vision remains strong and invigorating; the writing is lyrical, polemical and moving as ever--and even more honest. In addition, Rich leaves us with what few other living poets are able to offer their readers: the images with which to build a strategy for survival. (289)

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